

CHRISTIAN MISSION AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Original in English

(Article published on Sedos, 2007.)

The following are the eight Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations:

- Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2. Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4. Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5. Improve maternal health
- Goal 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8. Develop a global partnership for development.

In this talk I shall attempt to answer two questions:

1. What is the *specifically Christian missionary reason* for commitment to the Millennium Goals—as distinct from moral reasons on which Christians will agree with humanists and people of other religions?
2. Is there a particular *focus or emphasis or flavour* which is characteristic of the Christian missionary approach to this issue?

Response to Question 1: "The Human One"

The single most important aspect of Christianity is, of course, the Incarnation - the fact that we believe that Jesus is not just a revelation of God but is God embodied in a human person. At the heart of this mystery of the

Incarnation is the title which is most commonly given to Jesus in the New Testament. This title was not ‘Son of God’. Rather it was ‘Son of Man’. In fact the phrase ‘Son of Man’ is an inaccurate and misleading translation of the New Testament phrase *‘ho huios tou anthropou’*. A more accurate translation would be ‘the Human One’. The equivalent phrase in Hebrew and Aramaic (ben-’adam, bar-’enos) appears quite frequently in the Old Testament as a synonym for ‘human person’ (e.g. Ps 8:4; 80:17; 144:3; Ez 2:1; 2:3). In the Book of Daniel the same phrase is used to designate a very special human person, one who represents all of his people and who also has a certain numinous aura about him (Dan 7:13).

Why would Jesus choose to call himself ‘the Human One’? It is quite likely that he deliberately chose this title because of its ambiguity and its range of meanings. It was ideal for Jesus’ purposes partly because it suggested a certain mysterious and heavenly character, while at the same time not carrying with it the ‘baggage’ which had come to be attached to the title ‘Messiah’. It was a title which could imply that Jesus was a chosen instrument of God. However, it is important not to allow these overtones of meaning to distract us from the most obvious meaning - the fact that Jesus chose to emphasise his humanity. The very frequent use of this title in the New Testament suggests that the distinctive characteristic of Jesus was precisely that he was human. The title may even hint that Jesus is *‘THE human’*—one who is the epitome of humanity.

So, we can say that the title means first of all that Jesus is saying that he is one of us, in solidarity with all other humans in the world. Secondly, it implies that Jesus is in some way a special kind of human, perhaps a model for what it means to be human—even, perhaps, a *representative* of all humanity and the *fulfilment* of humanity’s highest purposes. Thirdly, I suggest that it also implies, indirectly, that his main concern was to help people to live a fully human life.

The way to God is through being fully human

The fact that Jesus called himself ‘the Human One’ indicates that the way to come close to God is not to try to escape from this world—not to run away from everyday human issues and problems but rather to live fully authentic human lives. By taking this title Jesus is inviting us to avoid the mistake made by many Christians in the past, and which many still make today, namely, the undervaluing of life here on earth and seeing this present life simply as a kind of test to see whether we deserve the reward of Heaven in the next life.

Since Jesus the Human One invites us to live a fully human life as he did, we his followers should commit ourselves wholeheartedly to living an authentically human life. In practice this means living by the values of respect, compassion, justice, personal integrity, ecological sensitivity, and other moral and ‘this-worldly’ values. The crucial point here is that the living out of ethical and political values is fully integrated into our following of Jesus and our developing a personal relationship with him. It has become customary to make a distinction between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of spirituality. But these two dimensions were already convergent in the Old Testament—above all in the call of the prophets. In Jesus, the vertical and the horizontal dimensions meet and overlap. This means that we cannot claim any authentic relationship with God unless we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the welfare of those who share the world with us.

This idea is supported by a key passage in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus is describing the coming of ‘the Human One’ at the final judgement. Matthew puts these words in his mouth: ‘I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink ... in prison and you visited me. ... As often as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.’ (Mt 25:35–40). Clearly, Jesus is here identifying himself with any human person who is in need, and especially with those who are neglected, outcast, or left on the margins of society. We may adapt to today’s world the words of the St John’s First Epistle: ‘If any one says, “I love God,” and ignores the structural injustice which brings suffering and death to millions of fellow-humans, that person is a liar; for those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they can see, cannot love God whom they have not seen.’ (cf. I Jn 4:20).

From all this we can see how important it is to abandon once for all the kind of dualistic distinction that was made in the past between the spiritual and what is ‘merely’ human or worldly. John Paul was the pope who took this on board most fully and clearly. In his very first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* he said:

The human person in the full truth of his or her existence and personal being and also of their community and social being ... this person is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission ... the way traced out by Christ himself ... (RH 14).

This means that whenever John Paul made statements emphasising the primacy of the spiritual he was *not* reverting to an old-fashioned dualist theology that would justify an ‘escape’ by Christians from social and political involvement. What he envisaged was just the opposite: an integral humanism embracing all dimensions of life, including the economic, the political, the

cultural, and the religious. Within this humanistic vision, ‘the spiritual’ meant for him those dimensions and aspects of human life that are deepest.

By calling himself ‘The Human One’ Jesus was emphasising the fact that he came to be in solidarity with *all* human beings. In doing so he was calling all of us to recognise that we have a fundamental solidarity with all other people, and he was inviting us to live out that solidarity.

The use of the title ‘The Human One’, together with the identification of Jesus with the least of his brothers or sisters, challenges chauvinistic nationalists to adopt a more universal outlook. It challenges those who are racially prejudiced to overcome their bias. It challenges people who have a patriarchal outlook to move to gender equality. It challenges business people—and all of us who are their customers—to see the inhabitants of less developed countries not as a source of cheap labour but as human beings with a fundamental right to decent wages and good working conditions. All these challenges come together in practice in the challenge to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the Millennium Development Goals; and we find in Jesus’ title ‘The Human One’ the *specifically Christian reason* for this commitment.

Response to Question 2: The Christian missionary emphasis: Option for the poor

I move on now to attempt to answer the second question which I posed at the beginning of this paper, namely: Is there a particular *focus or emphasis or flavour* which is characteristic of the Christian approach to this issue? The answer is that the particular emphasis which characterises the commitment of the Christian to the Millennium Development Goals is, or at least should be, a preferential option for the poor.

I should add at once that in my opinion Christians today are also called to make ‘an option for the earth’. Like the option for the poor this is also a vitally important commitment; and the two options are closely related to each other. However, in this paper I shall deal only with the option for the poor—mainly because the option for the earth is one which *all* humans are called to make and it is not so obvious at present that it is particularly characteristic of Christians as distinct from people of other religions or none.

The phrase ‘option for the poor’ emerged only within the past generation. The word ‘option’ implies that there is a personal choice. While emphasising this personal aspect, I would want to insist that the choice in question is not essentially an act of private asceticism or even of face-to-face compassion for a poor person. It is specifically a response at the level of the wider society as a whole, a response to the unjust ordering of society. Therefore it makes

sense only in the context of an awareness of how unjustly society is structured and of the urgent need to work for structural justice in each society and in the world as a whole.

When we look in the Bible for a basis for the phrase ‘option for the poor’, it may be helpful to make a preliminary distinction between an option for *justice* and a specific option for *the poor*, and then to see how the former is transformed in the light of the latter. In much of the Bible there is an emphasis on social justice. We see the outrage of God, expressed by the prophets, and later by Jesus, about the mistreatment of the poor and the hard-heartedness and arrogance of the rich. This is the option for *justice*.

Option specifically for *the poor* is located within this wider context, but here the emphasis is different. From a biblical perspective the phrase ‘option for the poor’ suggests a spirituality inspired by the belief that God chooses the weak to confound the strong, and chooses the foolish to show up the wisdom of the wise (I Cor 1:27-8). Time after time we see in the Bible that God chooses weak and unlikely people, in order to show that what is important is not human power but trust in and reliance on divine initiative and power. We see that God chose Moses who was a poor speaker (Ex 4:10-12) and David who was the least likely of all his family to be king (I Sam 16:6-13). It is clear that God’s choice of Israel to be the Chosen People was not intended to make political sense but rather to undermine conventional political wisdom. Furthermore, it was not by accident that Jesus came from a despised village in a despised province: ‘can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (Jn 1:46). All these examples show that the option for the poor is first of all an option made by *God*—a choice to give a privileged status to ‘the poor’. The option for the poor made by us individually or collectively is merely our attempt to come in line with the prior option of God.

Marxist?

When the concept of an option of the poor was first proposed by liberation theologians, many opponents of the idea (including some important Church leaders) accused these theologians of being Marxists. It is true that a Marxist-style ‘class option’ and an option for the poor have something common. Nevertheless there is a notable difference between them. The Marxist notion of a class option makes sound political sense; and that is why it was seen as a serious threat by those who held power in the West. For instance, it is quite easy to believe that if a significant number of educated middle-class people make common cause with the poorer classes, then they could provide the masses with the analytical and organisational skills required for a successful revolution.

A biblically-inspired ‘option for the poor’ is different. It cannot be seen as a shrewd political choice to take the side of an oppressed but potentially powerful working-class. It is rather a matter of taking the side of those who are the most marginalised and weakest people in any particular society or in the world as a whole. It is by no means likely that the widows, the orphans, the ‘strangers’ (that is, the refugees), the prostitutes or the tax-collectors will ever become major political powers in society. Consequently, to opt for the poor in the biblical sense is not to make a shrewd political gamble but to throw oneself on the mercy of God. It involves renouncing any likelihood of political success in the conventional sense. In fact it means that one has radically re-defined the very notion of success, and the purpose of human existence. It is a decision to seek one’s fulfilment and joy in ways that are incomprehensible in terms of the prevailing culture, and that represent a fundamental challenge to the assumptions of current society.

Redefining Justice

From all this it is clear that to make an option for poor is not something added on to other virtues and other aspects of the Christian faith; rather it is an option which radically transforms all aspects of the Christian and moral life. So it also changes one’s understanding of an option for justice. It means that justice is no longer to be seen simply in terms of ensuring that available goods and favours are fairly distributed. It goes further than that, recognising first of all that people are not all equally endowed; and, secondly, taking account of the unfortunate legacy of oppression and despoliation in the past.

This means that, if the world is to become a place of true justice, peace, and human fulfilment, it is essential that many individuals and whole classes, nations, even continents be given *preferential* treatment, to compensate for their disadvantaged position. This point was already expressed quite well by Pope Leo XIII in the first of the great social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*:

... when there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly-off have a claim to especial consideration. The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves . . . whereas the mass of the poor . . . must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State (RN 29).

Solidarity with the poor

An authentic option for the poor has two equally important aspects—a ‘solidarity’ aspect which is about life-style and a political or quasi-political aspect which has to do with analysis and action. The solidarity aspect involves a deliberate choice to enter in some degree into the world of those who have been left on the margins of society—to share in a significant way

in their experience of being mistreated, by-passed, or left helpless. This choice of a different life-style springs from compassion—a word which means, literally, suffering with others. It involves a choice to deepen this compassion by sharing to some extent, in the suffering of the poor. By entering the world of deprived people one extends and deepens the experience of ‘suffering with’ those on the margins. And by doing so one comes to share not only their pain and struggle but also their hopes and their joys.

When I speak of choosing, to some extent, the life-style of poorer people I am referring to the kind of food we eat, the clothes we wear and the way our homes are furnished. But much more significant than these are our choices about the friends we cultivate, the area in which we live, the kinds of work we undertake and the attitudes and style that go hand-in-hand with these aspects of our lives. These are the really significant choices made by most missionaries.

By sharing in the life of marginalised people one begins to have that sense of ‘togetherness’ which frequently characterises such groups. This is the primary situation in which people can have what I am calling the *experience* of solidarity, which is the matrix out of which the *virtue* of solidarity can develop. Without this experience of solidarity the would-be reformer cannot help thinking about the poor not as ‘us’ but as ‘them’, merely the objects of one’s sympathy. The person who is not living in solidarity with ‘the poor’ can scarcely avoid being paternalistic. And when it comes to working for change, such a person is tempted to be manipulative—trying to get ‘the poor’ to take the actions which seem right to the ‘do-gooder’. Poor people will sense this, no matter how well it is disguised. To become an effective and respectful agent of change one must become part of the group in some degree and one must be able to experience oneself—and be experienced by others—as ‘one of us’.

Of course the person who is making the option has probably come from a different background and may retain a different accent or even have a different skin colour. In that sense the person may always be seen as distinct; but the group with whom he or she has come to live or work may nevertheless choose to accept this person as ‘one of us’—or at least ‘one with us’—one who shares their interests (in both senses of that word). In this fullest sense solidarity is a gift which those who are poor or marginalised may freely offer to the person who opts to share their life in some degree. It is a gift which cannot be presumed or demanded from them. They give it in their own time and in their own degree, and never to those who come to them with an attitude of superiority or paternalism.

I move on now from solidarity which is the first aspect of option for the

poor to the second aspect which has to do with political or quasi-political action. This involves beginning with a *discernment* and *analysis* of the situation. It leads on to a fundamental choice to ensure that one is not consciously or unconsciously *colluding* in this injustice and marginalisation. The next step is joint action to *challenge* structural injustice and marginalisation of people. However, it is not enough for privileged people to protest *on behalf of* those who have been marginalised. The challenge must come *from the group themselves*, since it is only in this way that they can overcome internalised oppression and regain psychological power. Those who are making the challenge may include some who, having come from a different background, now make common cause with them—and this is where privileged people make their option for the poor.

At each stage of this process those of us who have made an option for the poor must not assume that we know the answers or even that it is for them to set the agenda. The people who have been marginalised must be empowered to speak and act on their own behalf. This is the only way they can overcome the sense of helplessness and dependency which is such a basic part of their plight. This means that those of us who have opted to be in solidarity with them often have to ‘hold back’. And when we do intervene it should be to encourage or facilitate the disadvantaged people themselves in articulating their own experience, in reaching an understanding of the root issues and in planning realistic action to overcome their marginalisation.

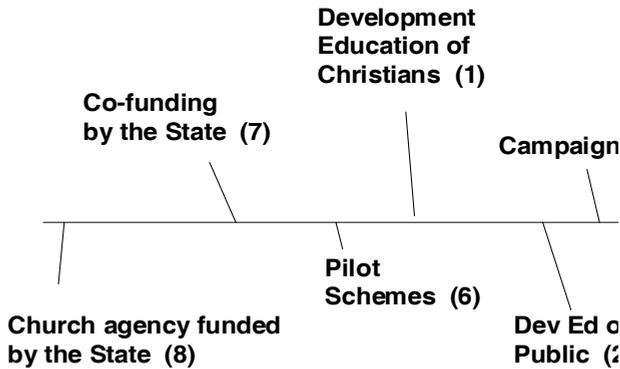
The final stage of an option for the poor is to find realistic *alternatives* to the present state of marginalisation and to begin the process of putting these alternatives into effect. Those who have made an option for the poor, and those with whom they are now in solidarity, must not imagine that this can be done easily or quickly. They may have to face a life-time of effort with no guarantee of short-term success. What spurs them on is not a naïve optimism but a hope based on trust in the power and promises of God. For the Christian the ultimate sign of this hope is the Cross—which, paradoxically, is a reminder that success may come only through what seems like ignominious failure.

In the light of the account I have just given of the major components of an option for the poor it is easy to see why there is a certain ambivalence in some Church authorities in relation to such an option. There is no doubt that the whole idea of a genuine option for the poor was and is too much of a challenge for some Church leaders. This accounts for various attempts which have been made to ‘tone down’ the very concept, and even to undermine it in practice—for instance, by the appointment of leaders who are unsympathetic to this whole approach.

A weakness of this ‘Maritain model’ is that it seems to take little or no account of the quasi-political activities engaged in by Church leaders and by organisations which are under the direction of Church authorities and which represent the Church. For instance, the work of Church human rights agencies or Church reconciliation projects must surely be seen as part of the action of ‘the Church’. And the lobbying by official Church organisations such as *Caritas*, Cafod, SCIAF, *Trócaire*, etc must also be seen as an action of ‘the Church’. Furthermore, the Maritain-style approach does not seem to take account of the quite strong and explicit stance which Pope John Paul II took on many issues of justice and which Benedict XVI himself has taken on the political issue of whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the European Union.

In sharp contrast to this ‘Maritain model’ is the liberation theology model where Church leaders and Church agencies are expected to take a strong and direct stance on key issues of social justice. This model is so well known that there is no need for me to spell it out here.

A SPECTRUM OF RESPO



Looking at what actually happens in practice, we can envisage a spectrum along which we may situate the various ways in which the Church and Church agencies exercise an influence on political decisions:

- (1) At one point of the spectrum is the Church’s education of its own members on issues of social justice.
- (2) A little further to the right along the scale we can locate the general development education programmes through which Church NGOs seek to educate the wider public, including non-Christians.
- (3) Further along again come the more targeted public awareness campaigns

of these agencies—for instance, the Lenten campaigns which focus on such issues as, say, child labour, or human trafficking; the aim here is more overtly political.

- (4) The next stage would be direct campaigning and lobbying of government for changes in official policy on specific issues, for instance, on such issues as ‘dumping’ of agricultural products.
- (5) Still further to the right on the spectrum, comes the kind of direct confrontation which takes place when repressive governments are openly challenged by liberation-minded Church authorities—for instance, Oscar Romero’s call to the soldiers not to obey the orders of their officers to shoot their fellow-citizens, or Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns’s support for protest groups by making churches available for their meetings.
- (6) Looking more towards the left place on the spectrum we can locate a move by Church agencies towards a more cooperative approach; it is the situation where a Church agency sets up a pilot programme of development, with the intention of handing it over to government when it has ‘got off the ground’, or with the hope that it will be a model which governments will follow.
- (7) Where cooperation is taken a stage further there is an on-going partnership with the civil authorities, where Church-sponsored programmes are co-funded by government.
- (8) Finally, there are situations where Church organisations have become more or less implementing agencies for government-funded programmes; we see examples of this in the way in which Church-owned schools and hospitals in some European countries are funded by government and have become more-or-less an integral part of the national educational and health system.

Church-run development and justice agencies have to make strategic decisions about where are the best places to locate themselves on this spectrum. In practice, different programmes of any particular Church or missionary or NGO agency may well be located at different points on the spectrum. This is quite acceptable—provided the challenging dimension of one programme is not being played down in order to ensure co-funding for another programme. It is particularly important that the agencies re-evaluate their decisions on a regular basis, in order to ensure that partnership and co-funding have not led to them being ‘tamed’ and acquiescent on key issues.

I lived for several years among very poor urban and rural communities in Africa. While there I found that the long history of colonialism had caused many of the white people there to assume that they were superior to the local people—not just better educated but also more efficient and more morally

upright than the Africans. This kind of unconscious ‘cultural arrogance’ can be noticed only ‘from below’ not ‘from above’. It would be picked up immediately by the local Africans but seldom by those of us Europeans or Americans who had taken on this collective superiority complex.

The crucial point is that privileged people have a blind-spot in relation to these kinds of cultural assumptions and prejudices. This is the psychological basis for giving a particular value to the experience of poor and disadvantaged people. If more privileged people do not make a serious effort to come into solidarity with the poor by sharing their experiences—at least in some degree—it is almost certain that their reading of social and political situations will be incorrect or inadequate.

A notable example of this is the blind spot in way the IMF experts read the situation in many poor countries, demanding structural adjustment programmes which, as the famous economist Stiglitz has shown, not only cause immense suffering to the most vulnerable people in these countries but which also have turned out not to be in the best economic interests of these countries.

I bring this paper to a close by proposing up two practical guidelines which need to be taken very seriously by missionaries, by Christian development or justice agencies and by governmental or inter-governmental agencies concerned with development:

- (a) When evaluating social, political, cultural, or religious issues it is necessary to take account of, and give special weight to, the view and the experience ‘from below’, that is, from the perspective of those who are disadvantaged. This is because those who see things only ‘from above’ are generally unaware of the blind spots which arise from their privileged position. Consequently they are unable to understand the situation correctly, and therefore they cannot work out a correct solution.
- (b) Disadvantaged people must be involved from the outset in any decision-making which affects them. Decisions which affect people who are disadvantaged from an economic, political, cultural, or religious point of view, no matter how good these decisions seem to be from the point of view of economists or political or theological ‘experts’, are not really good decisions unless they are made with the active participation of those whom they affect. This participation cannot be ‘tacked on’ at the end when the decisions have effectively been already made.